

Health staff earn A-Plus on COVID testing for schools



By Christopher Tittel

Tatiana Lorenzo sits quietly at a cafeteria table inside the front door to the COVID-19 testing site that the Florida Department of Health in Manatee County (DOH-Manatee) has been running at John Marble Park since the beginning of the 2021-22 school year.

The site offers rapid PCR tests for the School District of Manatee County (staff, students and families) and employees of Manatee County Government and DOH-Manatee.

These are the children who need to be in school and folks who work the frontlines serving members of the public all day long. They need to

The small yet mighty team working at the John Marble testing site continues to work wonders that make us so proud. You are saving lives!

— Dr. Jennifer Bencie
Health Officer
DOH-Manatee



know their COVID status as quickly as possible to determine whether to return to work to finish out the day or head home for a 5-day isolation period.

DOH-Manatee staff members run the site, sometimes working into the wee hours of the next day to process upward of 400 tests collected the day before so that they can clear the decks for the next day's worth of testing.

Lorenzo is taking a short break from the constant whirl around the gymnasium, sanitizing everything from clipboards and pens to long tables to door handles on entrances, exits and bathrooms.

Lorenzo is key to easing public concerns that the virus could be lurking on high-touch surfaces.

Welcome

Alex Rana, who normally works in the DOH-Manatee Medicine Room, is currently working the front door to the testing site.

Rana welcomes clients to the site, handing out consent forms and information on COVID testing, taking temperatures and offering disposable face masks and latex gloves to anyone in need.

“We’re providing a much-needed service to the community,” Rana said through his face mask and protective shield. “It’s great to work together to get these numbers down.”

Rana refers to the COVID positivity rates seen in Manatee County in recent months.

According to Dr. Edwin Hernandez, clinical administration director and John Marble site manager, COVID positivity rates when the site reopened after the December holiday break were running between 30 and 50 percent.

Today, they’re holding somewhat steady at 32 percent.

“We still have a way to go in bringing those rates down to where we want them to be,” Dr. Hernandez said.

Come on Over

Clients proceed from the welcome table to the registration table, where completed consent forms are collected, testing packets are distributed and instructions on how to proceed are given.

John Quartuccio, Jimmy Flores and Isaac Gomez, whose primary desk job includes data entry, sit at the registration tables when working the site.

“Students, teachers and county workers have a higher risk of exposure,” Quartuccio said. “It’s important to have a site like this where results can come back quickly.”

Gomez adds that Marble wait times are considerably shorter than at other test sites.

“We always try to make them feel at home,” Flores said.

Tracy Rones, who normally works the COVID vaccination front at DOH-Manatee’s new location — Manatee South Center, 7780 Westmoreland Road, Bradenton — said the “feel at home” efforts are vital.

“It makes everyone, especially the children, feel less nervous about the experience.”

The Big Moment

Testing packets in hand, clients proceed from the registration tables to the clinical staff.

“This constitutes the second level of prevention efforts and epidemiological investigation,” Dr. Hernandez said. “Testing is the essence to strategizing next steps in mitigation efforts.”

Iliana Drice and Yashida Ferguson, both licensed practical nurses, are swabbing clients on this particular day.

A small swab is inserted into one nostril and twirled several times and then inserted into the other nostril and twirled several times before it is slipped into a plastic bag with client information attached and passed to the “test readers.”

“It’s a great feeling putting public health into action,” Dr. Hernandez said. “It demonstrates our commitment to the agency’s mission, which is to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.”

Readings

Beth Ozimek, Damaris Jose, Sonia Hernandez, Elizabeth Matute and Diana Mendoza are the “test readers” for the day.

Each swab they receive is inserted into a plastic box about the size of a deck of cards with sensors that read the results of each test.

The results are sent to DOH-Manatee’s epidemiological team to load into the Merlin disease tracking system and to the contact tracing team to notify those who test positive.

Ozimek and the “test readers” know the importance of the role they play in preventing the spread of disease.

“It’s about helping Manatee County stay safe,” Ozimek said.

Additional Support

Like Tatiana Lorenzo, Wes Pyontyk plays a vital role in supporting the operation with oversight of the facility itself.

He also makes clear the importance of this service to Manatee County.

“We want to make sure we have less disease in the community,” Pyontyk said. ♦

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